

## Jesus and the Canaanite woman

Matthew 15.21-25

What a curious story it is that we have in today's Gospel: We are brought up more likely than not on the idea that Jesus loves us, and that we have rights with him, as it were. But here is a story of Jesus seemingly rejecting a woman in need, at first, anyway. What are we going to make of it? I am going to ask two questions: firstly why did Jesus deal with the woman in this way? And secondly, why does St Matthew tell us the story?

The woman was a foreigner - and as you know well, the Jews of Jesus time didn't have a very high opinion of foreigners - they were very often called "Gentile dogs" - and in Jesus' day the word dog had something of the insult that we still have in the word "bitch". Not only was she a foreigner, but she came from part of the land that the Jews claimed as theirs. So we might expect she is not a person of great standing. But she had a sick daughter - why didn't Jesus heal her immediately? He seems to be sharing the common view of foreigners. I think there may be two reasons for his attitude. Firstly, he seemed to have a very definite view of his job. He had come to bring good news to God's own people - the Jews. He was the Jews' Messiah - and it was their right to hear him. He knew that many of them would reject him - but nonetheless, they were to be given their chance. So there may be an element of distress that he was being put into a position which he did not like - that he was ministering to Gentiles before the Jews. However difficult this idea may seem to us, it does fit in with what Jesus thought about himself.

The second reason is that he appeared to want to awaken faith in the woman. She came calling him "Son of David". Let us try to put ourselves in her position. She knows a bit about him from the gossip that she has heard. She knows that he is a Jewish holy man, a wonder worker, a healer. So she makes her request. Hey, Jewish man, she shouts. She looks to him as a great man, perhaps with awe at what seem his magical powers. And Jesus lets her stew. She has glimpsed something of his nature. But if he heals her daughter now, she will go away simply saying "That great Jewish teacher has healed my daughter". The spark of faith that Jesus had recognized, would remain a spark. What Jesus wants to do is to fan it into a flame. And in fact, by being seemingly stand-offish, he achieves that. She began by calling him Son of David, and she ends up calling him Lord. Her request to the earthly man whom she has heard about has begun to turn into prayer to the Lord, the Son of God. She started off by following them, she ends up on her knees. Jesus has achieved more than the healing of the girl - he has achieved the woman finding faith, finding acceptance by God.

But, to come to my second question: why does Matthew tell us the story? To see that we need first of all to read the bit that comes before it. Matthew arranges his stories in a good order for what he is trying to get over, and we are wrong to read them in isolation. He has been talking about things that are clean and unclean. He has been trying to get a balance different from the Jewish lawyers. People are not made unclean by eating from dirty crockery, but by the evil that comes out of their mouths. Then he goes on to tell this story. He is still addressing the Jews on the same subject. They think that the Gentiles are unclean, that they must have nothing to do with them. That debate continued into the time of the early church - should the Christian

missionaries be preaching to the Gentiles or to the Jewish communities? It was a serious problem for many years. Here Matthew takes a story out of his collection of reminiscences of Jesus and puts it in a place where it will have the maximum impact. Look, you Jewish Christians, he is saying - don't you remember how our Lord himself thought about these things - and he didn't find it easy either - but in the end he showed us that faith is just as possible to someone who is not a Jew as it is to you? And of course we still need to learn that lesson. There are still racially segregated churches in the world - where the lesson of this story has still not been understood at all. In the end of the day, Jesus says there are no second-class citizens. God loves all his creation, and all his creatures may find faith. We have to watch it in our own congregations. Suppose somebody turns up who you may think is a rogue or worse. Do we say "what is he doing here?" or do we say "nice to see you"? If we say the first, we are treating that person as a dog, and not as someone who has as much right to God's love and forgiveness as ourselves.

Well, finally let us look at this woman, and see what else we may learn from her. Look first of all at her love - love which meant she was prepared to approach a Jew who might well be expected to snub her - they normally wouldn't talk to her at all. But her love made her conquer shyness, and risk her pride. She had open eyes - able to perceive more than she had seen at first. She had no fixed ideas about Jesus - she decided what she should think about him as she met him. She had persistence - and that, it seems, is necessary for prayer. Jesus emphasised. that several times. Our prayer is what we ask for in faith - not a passing whim. Her request as something she wanted passionately - and she was not going to be put off by an initial refusal. And she had a sense of humour. Even in her distress about her child, she could laugh. When Jesus said - no doubt with a twinkle in his eye - about the food not going to the dogs, her ready wit was there with a quick repartee. Fair enough she says, but the dogs get the bits of bread that people use to wipe their greasy fingers on - what about a bit of that? She is an example for us. How is our faith going to grow? By having the attitudes that she had, I believe - love that is prepared to risk everything because we want to serve God, open eyes to see more of God. Probably we all have a very limited view of Christ, as she had when she first spoke. She changed her views as time went on. So must we...like the actor in Godspell, who began by seeing Jesus as a character in a musical, and ended like the woman in the story, by calling him Lord. We need persistence. Faith is a gift, but it needs to be worked at. It cost God his Son's life to bring us back to himself. It will cost us more than passing thought to be truly servants of Christ. But at the same time, we need her sense of humour. We need a sunny faith, not a solemn faith. We need a cheerful faith, not a worried faith. And of course we may have it. Love, open eyes, persistence, joy - and the reward is Christ's commendation -You have great faith. Let your wish be granted.